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WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

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A Question Answered from the Messages and Addresses of

WOODROW WILSON

President of the United States of America

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The Object of the War

THE position of America in this war is so clearly avowed that no man can be excused for mistaking it.

She seeks no material profit or aggrandizement of any kind. She is fighting for no advantage or selfish object of her own, but for the liberation of peoples everywhere from the aggressions of autocratic force.

The ruling classes in Germany have begun of late to profess a like liberality and justice of purpose, but only to preserve the power they have set up in Germany and the selfish advantages which they have wrongly gained for themselves, and their private projects of power all the way from Berlin to Bagdad and beyond. Government after government has by their influence, without open conquest of its territory, been linked together in a net of intrigue directed against nothing less than the peace and liberty of the world. The meshes of that intrigue must be broken but cannot be broken unless wrongs already done are undone, and adequate measures must be taken to prevent it from ever again being rewoven or repaired.

We are fighting for the liberty, the self-govern-

ment and the undictated development of all peoples, and every feature of the settlement that concludes this war must be conceived and executed for that purpose. Wrongs must first be righted and then adequate safeguards must be created to prevent their being committed again.

No people must be forced under sovereignty under which it does not wish to live. No territory must change hands except for the purpose of securing those who inhabit it a fair chance of life and liberty. No indemnities must be insisted on except those that constitute payment for manifest wrongs done. No readjustments of power must be made except such as will tend to secure the future peace of the world and the future welfare and happiness of its peoples.

And then **the free peoples of the world must draw together in some common covenant,** some genuine and practical cooperation that will in effect combine their force to secure peace and justice in the dealings of nations with one another. The brotherhood of mankind must no longer be a fair but empty phrase; it must be given a structure of force and reality. The nations must realize their common life and effect a workable partnership to secure that life against the aggressions of autocratic and self-pleasing power.

For these things we can afford to pour out

blood and treasure. For these are the things we have always professed to desire, and unless we pour out blood and treasure now and succeed, we may never be able to unite or show conquering force again in the great cause of human liberty. **The day has come to conquer or submit.** If the forces of autocracy can divide us, they will overcome us; if we stand together victory is certain and the liberty which victory will secure. We can afford then to be generous, but we cannot afford then or now to be weak or omit any single guarantee of justice and security.

— *Message to Russia*, June 9, 1917.

"The object of this war is **to deliver the free peoples of the world from the menace and the actual power of a vast military establishment controlled by an irresponsible Government,** which, having secretly planned to dominate the world, proceeded to carry the plan out without regard either to the sacred obligations of treaty or the long-established practices and long-cherished principles of international action and honor; which chose its own time for the war; delivered its blow fiercely and suddenly; stopped at no barrier, either of law or of mercy; swept a whole continent with the tide of blood — not the blood of soldiers

only, but the blood of innocent women and children also, and of the helpless poor; and now stands balked but not defeated, the enemy of four-fifths of the world."

— *Reply to the Pope*, August 27, 1917.

The war was started by Germany. Her authorities deny that they started it, but I am willing to let the statement I have just made await the verdict of history. And the thing that needs to be explained is why Germany started the war. Remember what the position of Germany was — as enviable a position as any nation has ever occupied.

The whole world stood in admiration of her wonderful intellectual and material achievements and all the intellectual men of the world went to school to her. Her men of science had made her industries perhaps the most competent industries in the world, and the label "Made in Germany" was a guarantee of good workmanship and of sound material. She had access to all the markets of the world and every other man who traded in these markets feared Germany because of her effective and almost irresistible competition.

She had a place in the sun. Why was she not satisfied? What more did she want? There

was nothing in the world of peace that she did not already have and have in abundance. We boast of the extraordinary pace of American advancement. We show with pride the statistics of the increase of our industries and of the population of our cities. Well, those statistics did not match the recent statistics of Germany.

Her old cities took on youth, grew faster than any American cities ever grew; her old industries opened their eyes and saw a new world and went out for its conquest; and yet the authorities of Germany were not satisfied. You have one part of the answer to the question why she was not satisfied in her methods of competition. There is no important industry in Germany upon which the government has not laid its hands to direct it and, when necessity arose, control it.

You have only to ask any man whom you meet, who is familiar with the conditions that prevailed before the war in the matter of international competition, to find out the methods of competition which the German manufacturers and exporters used under the patronage and support of the government of Germany. You will find that they were the same sorts of competition that we have tried to prevent by law within our own borders.

If they could not sell their goods cheaper than

we could sell ours, at a profit to themselves, they could get a subsidy from the government which made it possible to sell them cheaper, anyhow; and the conditions of competition were thus controlled in large measure by the German government itself.

But that did not satisfy the German government.

All the while there was lying behind its thought, in its dreams of the future, a political control, which would enable it in the long run to dominate the labor and the industry of the world.

They were not content with success by superior achievement; they wanted success by authority.

Germany is determined that the political power of the world shall belong to her. There have been such ambitions before. They have been in part realized. But never before have those ambitions been based upon so exact and precise and scientific a plan of domination.

Any body of free men that compounds with the present German government is compounding for its own destruction.

— *Buffalo Address*, November 12, 1917.

How We Came Into the War

AMERICAN armies were never before sent across the sea. Why are they sent now? For some new purpose, for which this great flag has never been carried before, or for some old, familiar, heroic purpose for which it has seen men, its own men, die on every battlefield on which Americans have borne arms since the revolution?

These are questions which must be answered. We are Americans. We in our turn serve America, and can serve her with no private purpose. We must use her flag as she has always used it. We are accountable at the bar of history and must plead in utter frankness what purpose it is we seek to serve.

It is plain enough how we were forced into the war. The extraordinary insults and aggression of the Imperial German government left us **no self-respecting choice** but to take up arms in defence of our rights as a free people and of our honor as a sovereign government. **The military masters of Germany denied us the right to be neutral.** They filled our unsuspecting communities with vicious spies and conspirators and sought to corrupt the opinion of our people in their own behalf. When they found they could

not do that, their agents diligently spread sedition amongst us and sought to draw our own citizens from their allegiance — and some of these agents were men connected with the official embassy of the German government itself here in our own capital.

They sought by violence to destroy our industries and arrest our commerce. They tried to incite Mexico to take up arms against us and to draw Japan into a hostile alliance with her — and that not by indirection, but by direct suggestion from the foreign office in Berlin. They impudently denied us the use of the high seas and repeatedly executed their threats that they would send to their death any of our people who ventured to approach the coasts of Europe. And many of our own people were corrupted. Men began to look upon their own neighbors with suspicion and to wonder in their hot resentment and surprise whether there was any community in which hostile intrigue did not work.

What great nation in such circumstances would not have taken up arms? Much as we desired peace, it was denied us, and not of our own choice. The flag under which we serve would have been dishonored had we withheld our hand.

— *Flag Day Address*, June 14, 1917.

A Peoples' War For Freedom

THE facts are patent to all the world, and nowhere are they more plainly seen than in the United States, where we are accustomed to deal with facts and not with sophistries; and the great fact that stands out above all the rest is that **this is a peoples' war, a war for freedom and justice and self-government amongst all the nations of the world, a war to make the world safe for the peoples who live upon it** and have made it their own, the German people themselves included; and that with us rests the choice to break through all these hypocrisies and patent cheats and masks of brute force and help set the world free, or else stand aside and let it be dominated a long age through by sheer weight of arms and the arbitrary choices of self-constituted masters, by the nation which can maintain the biggest armies and the most irresistible armaments — a power to which the world has afforded no parallel and in the face of which political freedom must wither and perish.

For us there is but one choice. We have made it. Woe be to the man or group of men that seeks to stand in our way in this day of high resolution when every principle we hold dearest is to be vindicated and made secure for the salvation of the nations. We are ready to plead

at the bar of history, and our flag shall wear a new lustre. Once more we shall make good with our lives and fortunes the great faith to which we were born, and a new glory shall shine in the face of our people.

— *Message to Russia*, June 8, 1917.

The cause being just and holy, the settlement must be of like motive and equality. For this we can fight, but for nothing less noble or less worthy of our traditions. For this cause we entered the war, and for this cause will we battle until the last gun is fired.

I have spoken plainly because this seems to me the time when it is most necessary to speak plainly in order that all the world may know that even in the heat and ardor of the struggle, and when our whole thought is of carrying the war through to its end we have not forgotten any ideal or principle for which the name of America has been held in honor among the nations, and for which it has been our glory to contend in the great generations that went before us. **A supreme moment of history has come. The eyes of the people have been opened and they see. The hand of God is laid upon the nations. He will show them favor, I devoutly believe, only if they rise to the clear heights of his own justice and mercy.**

— *Message relating to Austria*, December 4, 1917.

Germany Not To Be Trusted

WE cannot take the word of the present rulers of Germany as a guarantee of anything that is to endure, unless explicitly supported by such conclusive evidence of the will and purpose of the German people themselves as the other peoples of the world would be justified in accepting.

Without such guarantees, treaties of settlement, agreements for disarmament, covenants to set up arbitration in the place of force, territorial adjustments, reconstitutions of small nations, if made with the German government, no man, no nation, could now depend on. We must await some new evidence of the purposes of the great peoples of the Central Powers. God grant it may be given soon, and in a way to restore the confidence of all peoples everywhere in the faith of nations and the possibility of a covenanted peace.

—*Reply to the Pope*, August 27, 1917.

We Must Win

THIS intolerable thing of which the masters of Germany have shown us the ugly face, this menace of combined intrigue and force, which we now see so clearly as the German power, a thing without conscience or honor or capacity for covenanted peace, must be crushed and, if it be not utterly brought to an end, at least shut out from the friendly intercourse of the nations.

And second, that when this thing and its power are indeed defeated and the time comes that we can discuss peace — when the German people have spokesmen whose word we can believe and when those spokesmen are ready in the name of their people to accept the common judgment of the nations as to what shall henceforth be the basis of law and of covenant for the life of the world — we shall be willing and glad to pay the full price for peace and pay it ungrudgingly.

It is impossible to apply any standard of justice so long as such forces are unchecked and undefeated as the present masters of Germany command. Not until that has been done can right be set up as arbiter and peacemaker among the nations. But when that has been done — as, God willing, it assuredly will be — we shall at

last be free to do an unprecedented thing, and this is the time to avow our purpose to do it.

We shall be free to base peace on generosity and justice to the exclusion of all selfish claims to advantage even on the part of the victors.

Let there be no misunderstanding. Our present and immediate task is to win the war, and nothing shall turn us aside from it until it is accomplished. Every power and resource we possess, whether of men, of money or of materials, is being devoted and will continue to be devoted to that purpose until it is achieved.

Those who desire to bring peace about before that purpose is achieved, I counsel to carry their advice elsewhere. We will not entertain it.

We shall regard the war only as won when the German people say to us, through properly accredited representatives, that they are ready to agree to a settlement based upon justice and the reparation of the wrongs their rulers have done.

— *Message to Austria*, December 4, 1917.

AMERICAN ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of, but ships and people of other neutral and friendly nations have been sunk and overwhelmed in the waters in the same way. There has been no discrimination. The challenge is to all mankind. Each nation must decide for itself how it will meet it. The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of counsel and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feeling away. Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only **the vindication of right**, of human right, of which we are only a single champion. There is one choice we cannot make, we are incapable of making. We will not choose the path of submission and suffer the most sacred rights of our nation and our people to be ignored or violated. The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.

One of the things that has served to convince us that the Prussian autocracy was not and could never be our friend is that from the very outset of the present war it has filled our unsuspect-

ing communities and even our offices of government, with spies and set criminal intrigues everywhere afoot against our national unity of council, our peace within and without, our industries and our commerce.

We are accepting this challenge of hostile purpose because we know that in such a government, following such methods, we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no assured security for the democratic governments of the world.

We are now about to accept the gage of battle with this natural foe to liberty and shall, if necessary, spend the whole force of the nation to check and nullify its pretensions and its power. We are glad, now that we see the facts with no veil of false pretense about them, to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included; for the rights of nations great and small, and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. The world must be made safe for democracy; its peace must be planted upon trusted foundations of political liberty.

We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We are but one of

the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of the nation can make them.

— *Message to Congress*, April 2, 1917.

The Peace We Seek

THE peace we make must deliver the once fair lands and happy peoples of Belgium and northern France from the Prussian conquest and the Prussian menace; but it must also deliver the peoples of Austria-Hungary, the peoples of the Balkans and the peoples of Turkey, alike in Europe and Asia, from the impudent and alien domination of the Prussian military and commercial autocracy.

We owe it, however, to ourselves to say that we do not wish in any way to impair or to rearrange the Austro-Hungarian empire. It is no affair of ours what they do with their own life, either industrially or politically. We do not purpose or desire to dictate to them in any way. We only desire to see that their affairs are left in their own hands, in all matters, great or small.

We shall hope to secure for the peoples of the Balkan peninsula and for the people of the Turkish empire the right and opportunity to make their own lives safe, their own fortunes secure against oppression or injustice and from the dictation of foreign courts or parties.

And our attitude and purpose with regard to Germany herself are of a like kind. We intend no wrong against the German empire, no inter-

ference with her internal affairs. We should deem either the one or the other absolutely unjustifiable, absolutely contrary to the principles we have professed to live by and to hold most sacred throughout our life as a nation.

For us this is a war of high principle, debased by no selfish ambition of conquest or spoliation; we know, and all the world knows, that **we have been forced into it to save the very institutions we live under from corruption and destruction.** The purposes of the central powers strike straight at the very heart of everything we believe in; their methods of warfare outrage every principle of humanity and of knightly honor; their intrigue has corrupted the very thought and spirit of many of our people; their sinister and secret diplomacy has sought to take our very territory away from us and disrupt the union of the states. Our safety would be at an end, our honor forever sullied and brought into contempt were we to permit their triumph. They are striking at the very existence of democracy and liberty.

It is because it is for us a war of high, disinterested purpose, in which all the free people of the world are banded together for the vindication of right, a war for the preservation of our nation of all that it has held dear of principle and of purpose, that we feel ourselves doubly constrained

to propose for its outcome only that which is righteous and of irreproachable intention, for our foes as well as for our friends.

Our Terms of Peace

IT will be our wish and purpose that the processes of peace, when they are begun, **shall be absolutely open, and that they shall involve and permit henceforth no secret understandings of any kind.**

The day of conquest and aggrandizement is gone by; so is also the day of secret covenants entered into in the interest of particular Governments and likely at some unlooked for moment to upset the peace of the world. It is this happy fact, now clear to the view of every public man whose thoughts do not still linger in an age that is dead and gone, which makes it possible for every nation whose purposes are consistent with justice and the peace of the world to avow now or at any other time the objects it has in view.

We entered this war because violations of right had occurred which touched us to the quick and made the life of our people impossible unless they were corrected and the world secured once for all against their recurrence. What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves.

It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation which, like our

own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealings by the other peoples of the world, as against force and selfish aggression.

All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us. The program of the world's peace, therefore, is our program, and that program, the only possible program, as we see it, is this:

1. **Open covenants of peace,** openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind, but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

2. **Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas,** outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.

3. **The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers** and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

4. **Adequate guarantees** given and taken that

national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.

5. A free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the Government whose title is to be determined.

6. **The evacuation of all Russian territory** and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy, and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire.

The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.

7. **Belgium**, the whole world will agree, **must**

be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and demanded for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.

8. **All French territory should be freed** and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.

9. **A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy** should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.

10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded **the freest opportunity of autonomous development.**

11. **Rumania, Servia and Montenegro should be evacuated**; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea, and the relations of the several Balkan States to one another determined by friendly counsel

along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality, and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan States should be entered into.

12. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and **the Dardanelles should be permanently opened** as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations, under international guarantees.

13. **An independent Polish State should be erected** which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish population, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

14. **A general association of nations must be formed** under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right, we feel ourselves to

be intimate partners of all the Governments and peoples associated together against the imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. **We stand together until the end.**

For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace, such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does remove.

We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise, such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her, either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade, if she is willing to associate with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing.

We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world — the new world in which we now live — instead of a place of mastery.

Neither do we presume to suggest to her any alteration or modification of her institutions. But

it is necessary, we must frankly say, and necessary as a preliminary to any intelligent dealings with her on our part, that we should know whom her spokesmen speak for when they speak to us, whether for the Reichstag majority, or for the military party and the men whose creed is imperial domination.

We have spoken now, surely in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle, and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess.

The moral climax of this, the culminating and final war for human liberty, has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.

The right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts — for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free people as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured.

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